

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 52)

Rabbi Simon Joshua Glazer (1878 – 1938) I

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Introduction

Virtually all of the rabbonim who came to America during the latter part of the nineteenth century did not speak English. A few rabbonim did master the English language and become proficient at speaking and writing it. One of these was Rabbi Simon Joshua Glazer, who did more than just learn to speak and write the English language; he also acquired a substantial secular education.

Sketch of Rabbi Glazer's Life

Rabbi Glazer, the son of Abraham Eliyahu, was born in Erzwilg, Lithuania on January 21, 1878.

At the age of nine, he entered the yeshiva of Yurburg, where he studied under Rabbi Wolf Pollack. Following his bar mitzvah, Glazer continued his Talmud studies at several Lithuanian yeshivas including Eurologa, where his scholarship advanced under the guidance of Rabbi Moshe Sadovsky. At the age of 18, Glazer received rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Alexander Moshe Lapidus and Rabbi Isaac Rabinowitz.

In 1896 Glazer moved to Touvorig, near the Prussian border, and began teaching at the local synagogue. To avoid service in the Russian army, Glazer left Touvorig shortly thereafter, crossing the border to Koenigsberg. After failing to receive permission to remain in Koenigsberg, he departed for Palestine in 1896. Finding no satisfactory means to earn a livelihood in Palestine, Glazer immigrated to America one year later.¹

In New York he met Kasriel Sarasohn, the editor of the Orthodox newspaper the *Yiddishe Gazeteer*. Sarasohn advised Rabbi Glazer to study the English language and a variety of secular subjects, because America needed rabbis who were not only Talmudic scholars but who were also secularly trained. The rabbi took Sarasohn's advice and devoted the next four years mastering the English language and acquiring secular knowledge. His spent the winter months immersed in the study of secular subjects, whereas during the summer he served as a cantor and Hebrew teacher in several American cities. In this way he was able to support himself while he studies. At the end of these four years Rabbi

Glazer emerged as an individual with a rare combination of skills – a secularly educated, European trained Talmud *Chocham* who spoke English fluently.

The Jews of Iowa

In 1902 Rabbi Glazer married Ida Cantor of Buffalo, New York, and accepted his first full-time position as the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Israel in Des Moines, Iowa. In 1904 he published his first book in **English**, *The Jews of Iowa*.² It was to be the first of 26 books that Rav Glazer would write! He also published hundreds of articles in newspapers and journals.

The title page of *The Jews of Iowa* reads

The Jews of Iowa

A COMPLETE HISTORY AND ACCURATE ACCOUNT OF
THEIR RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL, ECONOMICAL AND
EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS IN THIS STATE;
A HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF
EUROPE, NORTH AND SOUTH
AMERICA IN MODERN TIMES,
AND A BRIEF HISTORY
OF IOWA

One cannot but marvel at how a man, who had arrived in America in 1897 without knowing any English and with minimal secular knowledge, was able to write such a book only seven years later.

The Jews of Iowa, by Rabbi Simon Glazer, of Des Moines, is a readable volume of 359 pages. The book, which is of recent issue, is intended to narrate a history of the Jews of Europe and of North and South America in modern times and to give a brief history of Iowa with a complete history of the Jews of Iowa, along with an accurate account of their religious, social, economic, and educational progress. The volume covers an unworked field; for, as the author writes, “The greatest and most difficult task was to collect data for the history of the Jews of Iowa. Not a single paragraph was to be found ready, not a single fact was on file with any Jew; and not a page was ever devoted to chronicle the annals of the Jewish pioneers of Iowa. The old newspapers had to be consulted, but there only a name sounding Jewish could be discovered. When a Jew donated or bequeathed money for any philanthropic purpose, the papers only recorded the fact that a prominent citizen by such and such a name offered a most generous gift, and, as there were no Jewish horse-thieves among the pioneers, no need was found to brand the genealogy of the individual in describing him.”³

The Jews of Iowa is an astonishingly comprehensive volume, and the breadth of Rabbi Glazer's scholarship is impressive. In his preface he writes:

This volume contains a history of the development of the modern Jews as well as an account of a small group of American Jews - The Jews of Iowa. The student, or reader, will easily be able to discover the mode of Israel's adventure during the sublimest epoch in the world's history and, subsequently, will readily discern the enigmatic tangles which are creating Jewish problems upon every continent. Besides, the general public will find in this work useful facts about a misunderstood class which seems to be struggling upon the waves of Time without interruption, and a mutual benefit is, therefore, inevitable.

This work is divided into three parts, treating practically three different subjects, but without knowing the first two the main object in view, in issuing this work, would have been futile. A short story of the growth of Iowa was necessary to demonstrate the rapid progress of this country, particularly of the West, which was considered but a vast tract of fruitless prairies, marshes and deserts for centuries after the discovery of this hemisphere. Likewise would the work have been behind its main object if an account of the modern adventures of Israel, of his equalization, emancipation, expulsion and emigration of Europe would have been omitted.

The material for the history of Iowa was gathered from numerous authoritative sources which were always handy at the State Library of the Capitol, and at the State Historical Hall at Des Moines, which is under the splendid supervision of the revered curator, Charles Aldrich.

The works of M'nasseh ben Israel, Professor H. Graetz, M. Keyserling [Kaysersling], Zemach David, Seder ha-Doroth, Isaac Hirsh Weiss, Simon Wolf, First Volume of Jewish Encyclopedia, and many other excellent authorities were employed as sources for the history of the Jews of Europe, North and South America since the discovery of the New World.

The Beginning of a Distinguished Rabbinical Career

Rabbi Glazer stayed in Des Moines for only three years. He subsequently went on to serve in numerous congregations in the United States and Canada, including Toledo, Ohio (1905 – 1907), Montreal, Quebec (1907 – 1918), Seattle, Washington (1918 – 1920), Kansas City, Missouri (1920 – 1923), as well as various synagogues in New York from 1923 until his passing in 1938. In each community he left his mark, and we shall describe some of his activities in future articles.

¹ **Orthodox Judaism in America, a Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook**, by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1966, page 75.

² This book may be downloaded at no cost from

http://books.google.com/books/pdf/The_Jews_of_Iowa.pdf?id=cqMdAAAAMAAJ&output=pdf&sig=TdyAxmAQKIMz6Ia4QcUQmnU-qxU

³ **Iowa Journal of History and Politics**, edited by Benjamin F. Shambaugh, Volume III, The State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, 1905, page 478.

This publication is available at no cost from

http://books.google.com/books?id=qXcSAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA478&lpg=PA478&dq=the+jews+of+iowa+glazer&source=web&ots=vjdoj0x6Jl&sig=Fq4FKxwhiYsl-mQqEJ9xb3_OdPY&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result